

The Courthouse in Jefferson

a poem by Colleen O'Brien

In the Courthouse the echoes rise

Off the cornucopia floor --

Voices, voices

 A cornucopia of justice

 business

 prayer

 song

 question

 chatter

 misery

 laughter

 judgment

 Rising up, up to the glass dome.

I lie down on a bed of grain, ingrained into the floor,

Mosaic tiles laid on by tile-layers hired to do art a hundred years ago.

Their lovely, sturdy, much-trod-upon craft

Still celebrates the breadbasket of the world:

The Land of Plenty.

I lie on my back, angel-like,

On the horn of plenty, looking for meaning.

Mostly there are dust motes

Rising.

I would rise with them, light as a mote;

I would levitate, I would ascend, I would acquire the motes' views

Of all who have passed here, all who have trod upon Plenty.

But first I must record (at the Recorder's Office)

My record of sadnesses:

 People dead, people buried,

 People gone, somewhere,

 Family and friend out of touch, out of mind,

 No longer a daily memory.

But there they are, in ledgers, in ink forever.

Then I will treasure (in the Treasurer's Office) my good fortune

In being born to Cornucopialand.

Once corncribbed by farmers on 160 acres a family,

Now few cribs left for the farmers who are left

To pay their taxes to the Treasurer.

Out in the countryside, I don't see much life --

No running around of kids, cows, pigs, farm wives, chickens.

Lonely out there, but-- a good thing:

With fewer farmyard nightlights, the indigo bowl reveals the Milky Way all summer long.

I go to the Clerk's Office merely to remind someone that I was a clerk . . . and a sodajerk . . .
at Tucker's Pharmacy, once Lyon's Drugs,
South side; gone now, as most of the "businesses around the square"
Are gone gone gone
Except in old phone books and in mind's eye of oldtimers.

I tiptoe past the Auditor's Office where the seriousness
Of counting votes takes place, no fooling around.
Hanging chads will never float out of this room.

Time to judge in the Judge's Chambers, a hidyhole for respite from judging
Or not to judge?

Time moves along, things change, who am I to judge?
I am not Judge Harris, my favorite judge, now moved in with the Big Judge in the Sky.
Nor am I Judge Hanson, famous judge, from poor boy with club foot to federal judgeship
appointed by President John F Kennedy -
A true Jefferson story, an American commonplace:
A boy, a youth a man reared on little
Even in the land of plenty,
Who became a judge, by god, and consorted with
The best -- as well as the worst -- Iowa had to offer,
What with criminals and judges being necessary to one another.

It is not for me to judge, but
Another American commonplace . . . I do.

I judge and jury in the Juror's Dormitory, a quaint idea, now defunct,
Where once 12 cots bedded 12 peers of the accused.
There is a shower, a toilet, at a time when most
Of America was well-acquainted with outhouses.
Quite the modern house, our Courthouse.

And the art! Second-floor murals of greatness:
Pioneers, farmers, industrialists in muted colors, some redone in vibrant hue . . .
Noble, art worthy of a dream of a country as it could be,
As well as of such a handsome building.

Now prone on the tiles of the rotunda,
I see close-at-hand the symbol of plenty, wealth, sweat, pride,
An inexhaustible source.
From my floored perspective I spy a hole in the wall, a tube, actually--
It is a central vac!
I learn from a Courthouse denizen that it was installed at construction
What modernity!
At a time when women scrubbed on hand and knee
Beat rugs on clotheslines,

Had no vote, let alone a vacuum cleaner,
The great house sucked all its dirt into its basement!
Oh, what treasure lies there in the cobwebbed dark?
Buttons, pennies, hayseeds, corn grains, bits of official papers,
Butts discarded from puffed-on cigars, cigarettes, cigarillos
Under this many-colored dome.
Rings, watches, ankle bracelets, a dress sucked off the body of a juror
(after 1920, 19th Amendment to the Constitution: The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.)
Pens, pencils, nibs, love notes, bubblegum, toupees, grand pianos,
A Buick, a Parker roll or two from Schoppe's Café.
Weeds of all phyla, June bugs, cicada shells,
Perhaps a snow shovel, a snow boot, an earmuff, oh, wow! A sled!
A megaphone ("Yea Red! Yea Black! There's junk in the basement!")
What other things got sucked in there, into the dank dark of the Cornucopia's underbelly?
Ideas, hope, abortion lore, lust in somebody's heart?
Secret deals, money exchanged, a little blackmail here and there?
Free thought, free speech, freedom stolen in the night?
What might have escaped the Courthouse vacuum?
Honest Treasurers, thorough janitors,
Juries of folks brave and true,
A judge now and then of deep compassion who drank gin when he could get it?

This is a courthouse with names of dead warriors but no poets, dead or alive, known or obscure;
Nevertheless, Greene County Courthouse is grand:
I love the wide, shallow steps, the marble worn under my feet
And those of thousands before me
Trudging up to pay taxes or get a driver's license, an absentee ballot.
And all the way up, to the courtroom, to be on the jury,
To watch a trial, to be on trial.
The courtroom holds no ghosts for me, but they are there
Hovering along the gold-leafed ceiling near the very fine
Tiffany-style skylight, daunting in its richness;
The whole room a show of wealth and power intimating who's got it and who gets away
with it.

Our Courthouse, in the end, is a noble building with noble goals
Of endurance in the face of bank runs, war, peace, drought, bumper crops, foreclosure, murder.
Not to mention the-times-they-are-a-changin'; they've always been so --
As the Courthouse holds our secrets,
And our facts, all those stored in the big-windowed offices on two floors around the rotunda
And all those neatly vacuumed from sight.

A revered house, our Courthouse
Serving up justice, cookies, music, pols' stump speeches, awards

Approvals, denials, permission, endless facts

And straight lemonade, no spike.

Through it all we've esteemed and valued and loved the classical beauty,

Cared for and taken pride in, mended cracks and fissures, polished surfaces,

Replaced dead trees, updated pipes and windows and ceilings and artwork,

Bathrooms, water fountains, roofs and chimneys

Someday, far from now, the Supes will hire an antiquarian, an archeologist or two,

And someone who cleans basements.